



TWENTY FOUR HOURS still to go on the Pride of Bilbao, as we lie recuperating on the sun drenched deck, bottle of water in hand, reminiscing about the past ten days' riding through France and the Spanish Pyrenees. After the excitement of riding through glorious vistas, all the ferry home had to offer was the tackiest of cabarets and the promise of Friday night rush hour in England.

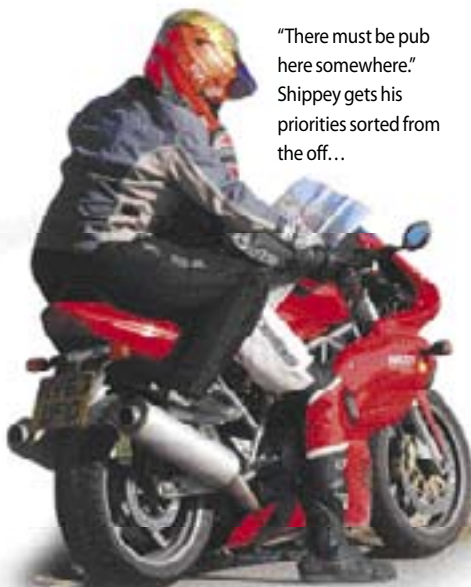
Tim and Su at Big Rock Tours run a tight ship and have become renowned for the excellent tours and World Championship race hospitality they run. Everything is meticulously planned down to the last detail; fuel stops, route cards, accommodation, even the fuel ranges of the riders taking part. Then Tim rides the route and stays in the hotels to ensure everything will be as good as perfect.

Unfortunately duty called and Tracie had to ride the first three days of the tour without me, but I caught up with her and the other 20-plus riders at Rodez in southern France on day three. Tracie kindly rode the hard part on my Ducati SS1000 longtermer and collected me from the airport to sit out the rest of the trip as my trusty guinea pig pillion! Roll back three days to a crisp Tuesday morning...

No Spain no gain

Shippey and Tracie take a package tour to Spain with a difference. Big Rock do the hard work so you don't have to. Sit back and enjoy the ride

WORDS & PICS MARK SHIPPEY & TRACIE HEATH



"There must be pub here somewhere." Shippey gets his priorities sorted from the off...

DAY 1 JUNE 8TH 150 MILES
Tracie hits the road

A feeling of fear and trepidation washed over me as I found out that Shippey would be unable to ride the first three days of the Big Rock Spanish Classic. However, the dream of riding over the other side of the channel (a first for me), carefree meandering through idyllic French villages and stunning views as far as the eye can see had installed a permanent smile on my face. But at 6am the reality of my undertaking was sinking in. Having studied the maps and detailed route cards, I had a lot of miles ahead.

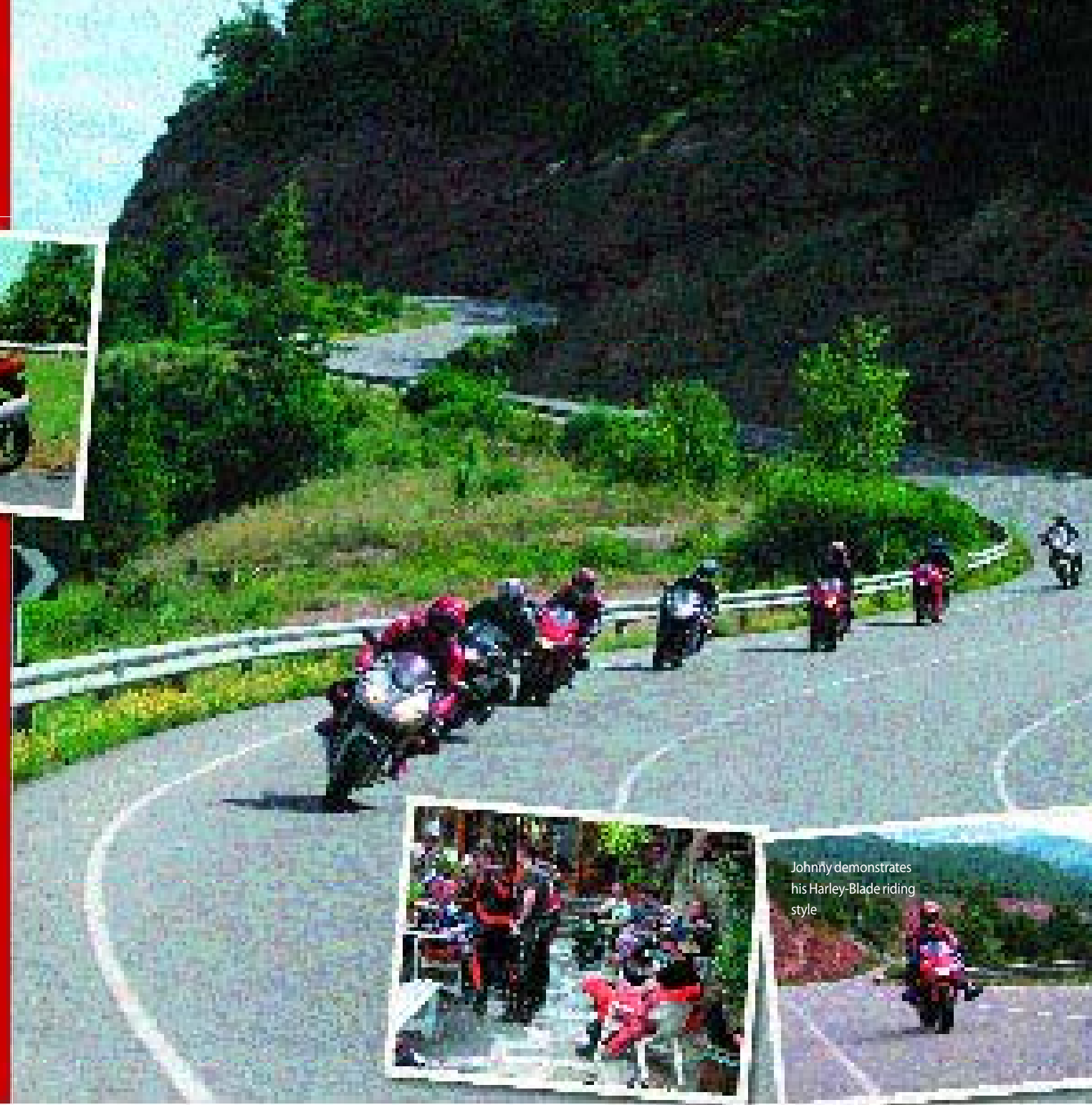
Once off the ferry, lead and tail riders were elected for the 'drop off' system and we thundered out of Cherbourg. Fears began to disappear as riding on the right felt natural right from the off. A short stretch of

dual carriageway set a flowing pace before joining the slower D154, allowing us to take in the atmosphere of the D-Day celebrations along the Normandy coast. Villages were awash with bunting, war vehicles and military personnel all the way to our first night stop at Creully on the D22.

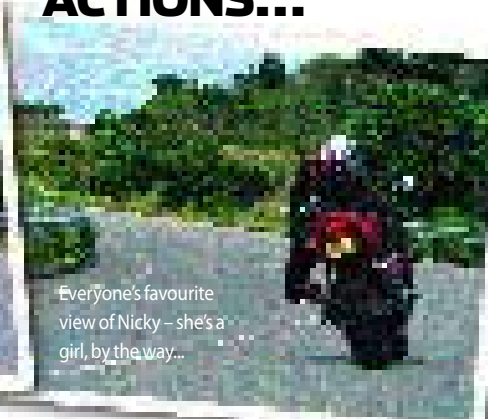
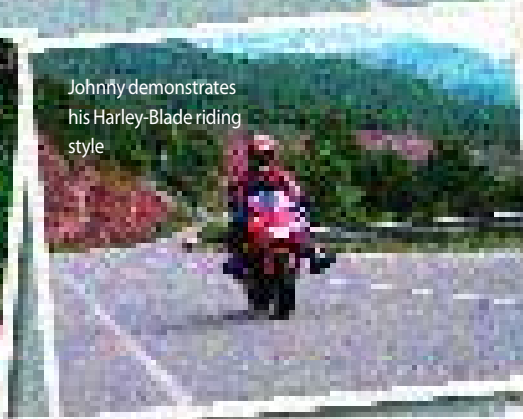
in the knowledge I would have to ride 420 miles in 10 hours. Now the day had come and I could barely eat a morsel at breakfast for nerves. Having never ridden that distance in a week before, let alone a day, how would I cope covering it in ten hours?

Away by 8am, route mapped, we began with the D12 before heading south on the delight of the D6 around Caen to join the D562 towards Flers. The group had warned me that the roads on this trip would be like no others I had ever

RIDERS
Johnny (or 'Johnny the Blade'), 36, from the West Midlands, is the director of a roofing company. Riding a FireBlade, obviously, he's on his "fourth or fifth" Big Rock tour. Why does he keep coming back? "The people, the sun and roads, the sense of freedom. I love being able to ride my Blade properly. I'm 99.9% certain I'll come again next year."



Johnny demonstrates his Harley-Blade riding style



Everyone's favourite view of Nicky - she's a girl, by the way...

ridden. Open sweeping bends allowed for fast, smooth riding, and I was having a great time. With my confidence on a high we joined the D18 to Alençon, a fantastic road. From here we picked up the N138 towards Le Mans, crammed with classic cars on their way to the famous 24-hour race. The road a little busier, but fun all the same, we were still making good progress. Skirting round Le Mans we headed south to Saumur on the D307, a fast flowing road allowing the Ducati to stretch its legs effortlessly and eat up the rolling countryside ahead. As we crossed the Loire into the pretty surroundings of Saumur for lunch the Ducati trip said we'd covered 191 miles. Only another 229 to go!

A short ride along the Loire onto the D751/D760 east to Loches, I kept an eye on the Ducati's temperature, which had seemed worryingly

high. The main N143 provided a good, fast stretch of fun road down to and through Châteauroux. It was getting pretty hot in the afternoon sun, and the Ducati running at 130° was adding to my discomfort. The need for fuel forced a welcome break at a supermarket. Litres of water consumed, wet wipes mopped brows and bodies slumped in any available shade. Forty five minutes later we dragged ourselves back on our bikes with the promise of an easy motorway blast. Picking up the A71 for 60 miles south the pace picked up, although when my speed and temperature both matched at the 136 mark I questioned my actions...and covered the clutch! Then it was off the autoroute, through the toll and along the D209 towards Randon for the day's final, tree-lined, miles.

RIDERS
Nicky, 29, a police officer from Essex, riding CBR600. Come on then Nicky, why Big Rock? "The organisation is great, you don't have to worry about anything. Tim and Su are very nice people and make you feel very welcome. I come away and it makes me a better rider as I get as much experience in two weeks as I would in a year's riding in the UK."

And Shippey takes over

My flight was early, and as soon as I stepped into the heat haze I remembered why my family had bought a house in the area ten years ago - rural France is one of the most relaxing places on earth. The pace of life is smooth and mellow, and suits me down to the ground. However, the message on the mobile told me Tracie was still 100 miles away. Bollocks. Nearly two hours to wait in the scorching heat with no Euros in my pocket! Fifteen Marlboro later I heard the unmistakable rumble of an Italian twin. My saviour had arrived!

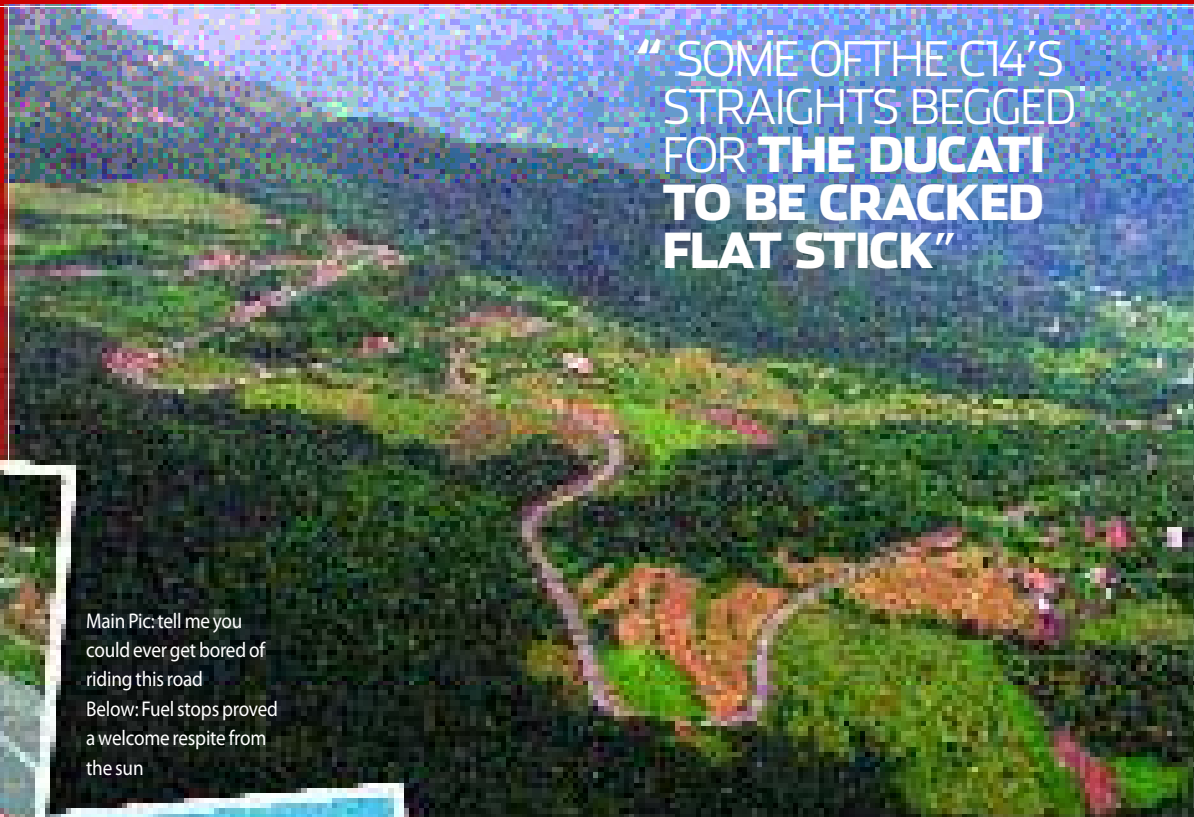
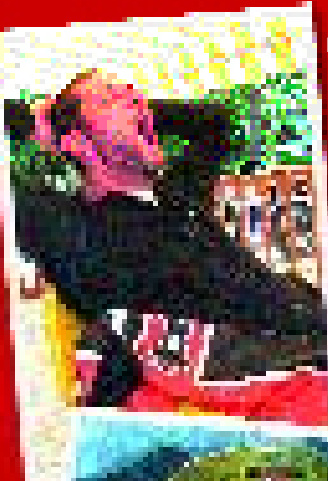
Now it was my turn to enjoy some sublime French tarmac. I know the Aveyron region pretty well, but straight away I made a mistake and headed off in the wrong direction. D'oh! Keeping my mouth shut and my self-esteem intact we ploughed on, the D902 opening out

with great company and a three-course meal, sleep came easily. Next morning, the hazy sun obscuring the rolling hills of the valley provided a great backdrop to breakfast on the terrace. I was to leave the group today and go it alone to collect Shippey from Rodez airport. The quickest route - a 150-mile stretch of the A75 autoroute - sounded boring, but how wrong could I be! The whole two-hour journey, fringed with a panoramic view of the surrounding, undulating Lozère region, was a delight. Unfortunately that was my lot. It was time to hand over to Shippey.

"WHEN SPEED AND TEMPERATURE BOTH MATCHED AT THE 136 MARK I BEGAN TO QUESTION MY ACTIONS..."

TOURING SPAIN

Left: Shippey's endless search for a decent pub got a bit tiring by day five...



"SOME OF THE C14'S STRAIGHTS BEGGED FOR THE DUCATI TO BE CRACKED FLAT STICK"

Main Pic: tell me you could ever get bored of riding this road
Below: Fuel stops proved a welcome respite from the sun



as we followed the river Tarn's course along its, beautiful undulating valley. Luckily a new tunnel had been built to cut the route short as we wound our way up and into St. Afrique. The final few miles launched us skyward at a rapid rate, the valley falling away dramatically to the left. All was going swimmingly until a very sharp and unannounced right-hand hairpin had me park the Ducati in the middle of the corner before tiptoeing sheepishly backwards and then carrying on.



We then

got a call from Tim, who had already crossed the border in the van, saying the heavens had opened and flash floods were the order of the day Spain-side. Donning waterproofs we refuelled and made our way towards Bourg-Madame and the border. The day had started well with glorious sunshine and, but then the heavens opened and God gave us all what for with a soggy, torrential vengeance.

Scrabbling with my marker pen I listened intently to the day's route. A 235-mile jaunt **ence, through the Pyrenees** and across the border into Spain at Bourg-Madame. The pace instantly surprised me. Adjusting my mind-set I cracked the throttle a little wider to maintain our mid-pack position. The roads were winding sweetly to the crest of the Aveyron before flowing on to the D622 and in to Castres. Breaking for lunch at the quaint foothill town of Aix les Thermes we were greeted by the sight of Pete piloting his KTM LC4, resplendent with a local's window-box shrubbery in tow having caught it on his wide bars squeezing down a narrow side street. The local chased Pete the length of the street shouting abuse before being confronted with 20-plus leather-clad English biker folk in the town square where Pete did his best to apologise.

The final push was on to our base camp nestled high in the Spanish Pyrenees and at the far end of 25 miles of hairpins, which on a dry day and without a pillion would have been a fantastic way to round off the day. Two-up on a torquey Ducati in the pissing rain with mud and gravel washing in rivers across the roads was not, however, my idea of fun.

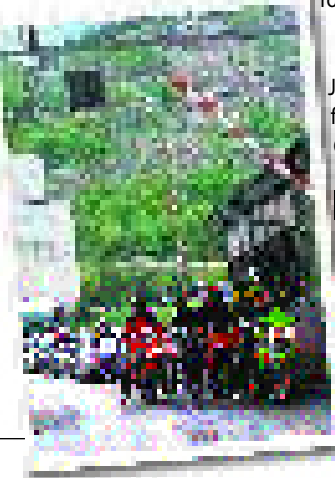
An hour later we made it to the hotel that would become our home for the next



TOTAL COST £1100 per rider (£949 pillion) – includes B&B plus evening meals
FUEL COST €250 approx
BEER & LUNCH COST €15 per day
TOLLS €40 approx
Big Rock
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www.bigrock-holidays.com

five nights. Drenched through, but now with beers in hand, we were all in good spirits.

An important part of Big Rock is the race hospitality they provide. The Spanish Classic trip is organised to coincide with the Catalan MotoGP **atalunya circuit on** the outskirts of Barcelona. Tim provides tickets for all those who wish to go (at extra cost), and then another ride-out takes place on the Sunday morning. Otherwise the weekend is basically free for exploring the magnificence of the Spanish Pyrenees. Tracie and I slipped away quietly after breakfast on the Saturday to catch the last of the qualifying sessions, then bedded down in a local hotel readying ourselves for race day festivities. Done and dusted, Rossi victorious (again), and a short trip back to base and beer, we planned the route for the Monday ride-out.



Just a short 240-miler that would see us follow the C26 from Solsona west to the C14 and past Oliana. Through the road-works, where I could see Chucky on his 998 **up more** and more from the orange sludge being deposited all over his sparkling Ducati, then whack a left at Adrall onto the N260 for some tight twisties on the way to Sort. A quick fuel stop and

Finally across the Spanish border and into bright sunshine. Not!

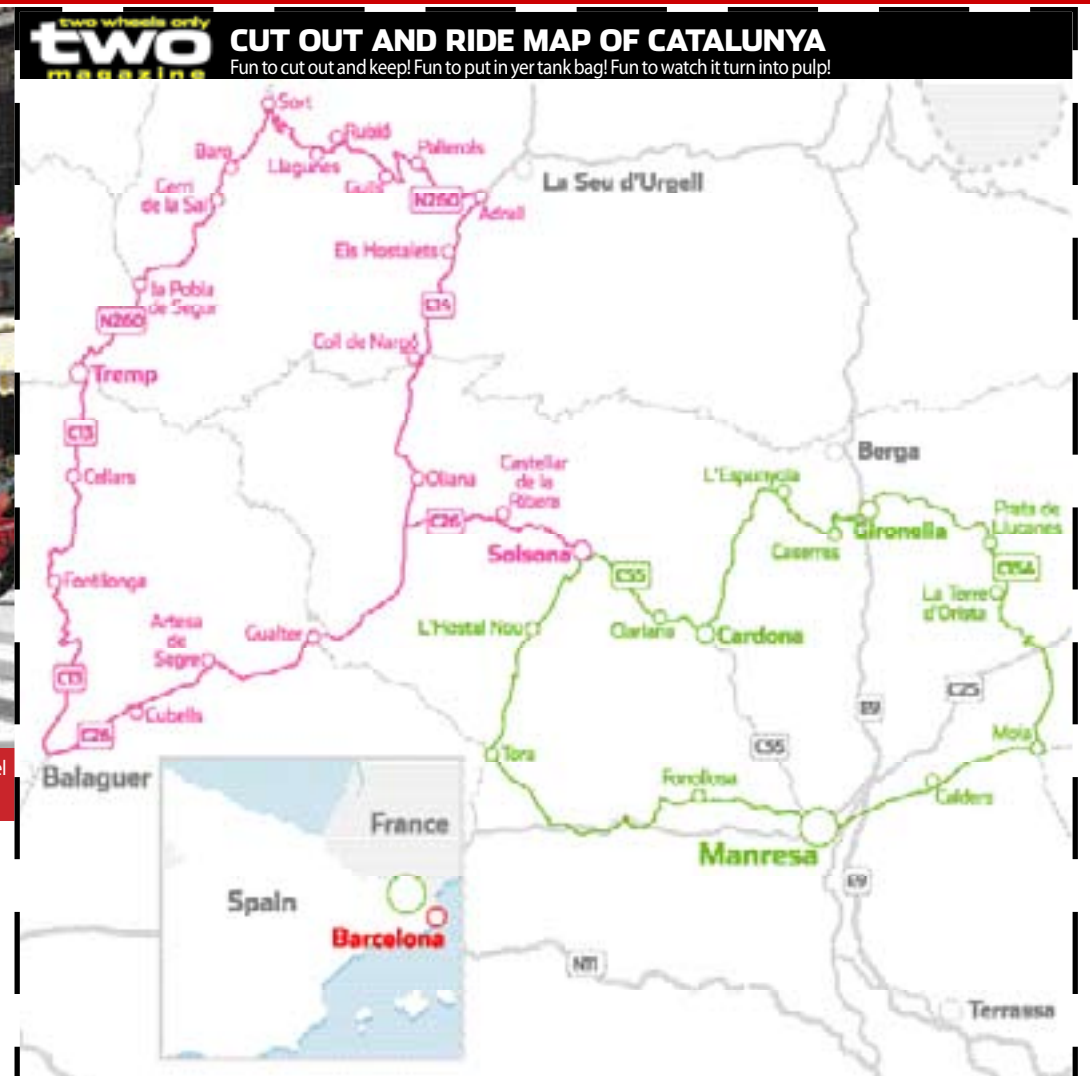


Lunch stops were a time to reflect, recuperate and refuel for the next 100-mile blast. It's a hard life...

it was off south towards Tremp, the road rising up into the Montsec d'Ares and some beautiful views down across the turquoise waters of la Noguera Pallaresa. Letting the rest of the group go on ahead I stupidly thought I could find my way back. But I couldn't – and my shonky sense of direction and refusal to accept that I had gone the wrong way added an extra 40 miles to my ride! No matter, parts of the C14 back towards Solsona were long, undulating straights that just begged for the Ducati to be cracked flat stick to see what she was made of!

For the last 'fun' ride of the tour we headed back in the opposite direction to take in what became known as the 'go-kart track'. Basically the narrowest, twistiest stretch of road you **encounter**, and with almost zero traffic. Only about 130 miles for this trip, but still knackered and mind-bending nonetheless. On the way back to base we paused for photos by the reservoir Pantà de la Llosa del Cavall, before making the most of the afternoon sun. Then we all went our separate ways to re-visit our favourite stretches of tarmac for one final blast before the following two-day trek back to Bilbao and the long voyage home.

In ten days of riding we covered 2105 miles on the Ducati. She didn't miss a beat. Even when the engine temperature threatened to overtake speed (they all do that, sir), the big twin's low down grunt took everything in its stride. And we had all made some great friends, brought



CUT OUT AND RIDE MAP OF CATALUNYA

Fun to cut out and keep! Fun to put in yer tank bag! Fun to watch it turn into pulp!

ARE WE THERE YET?

SPANISH SENORITAS A-PLENTY WITH A FLOWING BLAST THROUGH THE SPANISH PYRENEES

ROUTE 1

● SOLSONA C26 OLIANA C14 ADRALL N260 SORT N260 TREMP C13 BALAGUER C26 ARTESA DE SEGRE C14 OLIANA C26 SOLSONA

ROUTE 2

● SOLSONA C55 L'HOSTAL NOU LV3005 TORÀ C1412 & BV3008 FONOLLOSA BV3008 MANRESA N141 CALDERS N141 MOIA C59 & C670 LA TORRE D'ORISTÀ B432 PRATS DE LLUCANES C154 GIRONELLA C154 CASERRES BV4131 L'ESPUNYOLA C26 & B420 CARDONA C55 SOLSONA
TOTAL 130 MILES

together by the bond of thousands of miles in saddle. Is it a tour? Yes and no. Although you can ride at your own pace there are times when it could be described as an endurance event. But only if you want it to be. And that's part of the fun. The riders came from all walks of life – a chief superintendent, a company director, a car salesman, TWO's Oafish staff writer – all united in the pursuit of pleasure and freedom that the glorious roads of France and Spain have to offer. Casualties? A few broken egos perhaps, and one

knackered KTM supermoto, but mainly tired faces and plenty of smiles all round. Will we all be back again next year? You bet your bottom dollar. It's too much fun to miss out.

MAP BY ANNE CAKEREAD